

Foreign Language Education Strategies, Objectives, and Goals

Joint National Committee for Languages and the National Council for Languages and International Studies

July 14, 2009

Although attention to education in the United States has tended to wax and wane depending on the political climate, we have now reached a critical time for education reform wherein the future of our country's global economic success, national security, and quality of life will be a direct result of education decisions that are made today. Currently, we are in the midst of policy debates on how to use the enormous stimulus fund provided for education through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) and the pending reauthorization of the federal education law, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (currently entitled No Child Left Behind). Because of these critical opportunities for change in education in the United States, it is vital to the future success of American students to ensure that they acquire global competency and skills for the 21st century.

Due to the increasingly global nature of today's economy and job market and the technological advancements of global interconnection, it is more essential than ever that foreign language education play a significant role in the development of 21st century skills at all levels of education, together with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Foreign language and culture skills are paramount for today's students to compete for successful careers in the federal government especially regarding diplomacy and national security, international business, and translation and interpretation, among many others. Despite this, foreign language instruction in K-12 schools in the United States has decreased during the last decade largely due to accountability and time constraints resulting from the No Child Left Behind legislation and overall funding limitations (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2008, unpublished data).

For these reasons, the Joint National Committee for Languages and the National Council for Languages and International Studies (JNCL-NCLIS) propose the following policy strategies in order to advance foreign language proficiency outcomes among all U.S. students, provide national coordination of language programs at all levels, and implement systemic solutions to make such proficiency outcomes a reality.

The need for national-level coordination:

- Throughout the United States government, provide a national framework and coordinating system for foreign language education that is overseen by a national advisor and coordinating council, such as provided for in Senator Daniel Akaka's National Foreign Language Coordination Act of 2009 (S. 1010); and,

JNCL-NCLIS

- In the Department of Education, create a position and office for an Assistant Secretary of International and Foreign Language Education, who would oversee and direct foreign language and international programs within ED and also work in cooperation with a national foreign language advisor and other federal agency officials to fulfill national language objectives.

The need for systemic solutions that lead to increased and prolonged language study and aim to achieve high levels of proficiency:

- Reaffirm the importance of foreign languages as a “core subject area” and a core area of knowledge in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), acknowledging that languages appear second on the core subjects list prepared by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and fourth on the list of Goals 2000 standards in basic academic subjects;
- Create and implement a national framework for sequenced and articulated preK-12 language programs, beginning at the elementary level and continuing progressively through higher education, that employ the national foreign language standards and valid and reliable assessments to measure proficiency outcomes;
- Encourage content-based language instruction and immersion education, starting in elementary school and continuing through the baccalaureate and/or professional levels, including overseas study, to increase the number of college graduates with “professional proficiency” in two or more languages with attention to major world languages currently underrepresented in U.S. education as well; and,
- Recognize the importance and benefits of early instruction in commonly taught languages as a foundation for students to gain competency in one world language and acquire language learning skills and provide later opportunities for study of less commonly taught and more difficult languages;
- Increase and reinvest the amounts of sustained federal funding available for articulated foreign language programs and increase grant funding opportunities to assist schools with the startup costs associated with beginning new, innovative, and/or significantly improved language programs.

The need for targeted research into questions regarding foreign language education:

- Provide funding for targeted research into questions, such as best practices (including, e.g. class size, time on task, use of target language), methodology, assessment techniques, teacher preparation, and the domestic and global effects of second language competency, that have been identified by language professionals as important to increasing the production and efficiency of language acquisition.

The need for more highly qualified, certified foreign language teachers:

- Address and correct the shortage of highly-qualified language teachers by increasing the number of avenues by which teachers can demonstrate competency and become certified at all levels of education, and by voluntary standardization of this process across states;
- Address and correct the current foreign language teacher shortage by providing scholarship funding, study abroad opportunities, and other incentives to foreign language students and professionally competent graduates with language proficiency to pursue credentials for language teaching careers; and,
- Increase funding and incentives for teacher professional development opportunities, including study abroad and language immersion experiences, to increase the number of highly qualified language teachers at all levels.

If we are able to achieve these goals through federal legislation and policies, the future workforce of the United States will be better equipped with the necessary communication and cultural skills to become active participants in a global society. Students will have the language resources they need to compete with their peers around the world for job opportunities and will also provide the United States with a cadre of individuals prepared to deal with national security, economic stability, effective diplomacy, and other critical issues of the 21st century.